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Worksheet: Voice and Register in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderland/La frontera*
SPAN 113, Fall 2007
Instructor: Zac Zimmer

This is a three-part exercise from the eighth week of the FWS. The goal of the exercise was to familiarize the students with the concepts of authorial voice, register and tone. Although this exercise focused on a work of literature and culminated with student-produced creative writing, it allowed the students to develop an awareness of these features that they could transfer to their own writing.

The first part of the exercise was a short response to Anzaldúa's novel. Each student posted his/her response to the course Bulletin Board, and the entire group reviewed the postings before coming to class. This allowed the students to arrive to class primed to discuss the Anzaldúa's complex language and to focus on the artistic choices that motivated her tonal shifts.

The second part of the exercise asked the students to form pairs and do a close reading of a selection from *Borderlands/La frontera*. Several of the groups shared their findings with the class, and I wrote a list of all of the different voices/genres/tones the students had identified on the blackboard.

Finally, I asked the students to write short paragraphs mimicking Anzaldúa's rapid shifts. Several students volunteered to read their work aloud; this ended up being one of the most entertaining exercises of the entire semester.

As a result, the students not only developed an understanding of Anzaldúa's linguistic choices, but they also had a first-hand experience making conscious choices in their own writing.

MATERIALS:

PART I: My online prompts

POSTING I

Some questions to consider:

- This is another one of those literary texts that is 'difficult to classify'. Do you see a link between the form of this text and its content?
- What was your experience of reading a bilingual text?
- Who is Anzaldúa's audience?
- How does the author relate to History?
- What are your general reactions so far? What questions do you have?

POSTING II

- Anzaldúa talks a lot about home: what does 'home' mean to her?
- How does Anzaldúa connect writing to her identity?
- When this book first came out (in 1988), many people had very strong reactions (as many of you did as well). Why do you think readers have a more personal reaction to this text than to, say, Piglia's **The Absent City**?
- How does Anzaldúa combine the **personal** and the **political**?
- Who is the book's target audience? By translating parts (even my rough, not-so-poetic translations), and I going against the spirit of Anzaldúa's project?

PART I: Student responses

Although switching between English and Spanish is a different and more challenging way of reading, it plays out well with the story and allows for the connection between both cultures, something which Anzaldúa wants to attain.

I really liked the description of borders on pg. 25, "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, the distinguish us from them...It is a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants." I think this whole section sets up the scene right away and gives the reader an understanding that the author is unhappy and torn between the two. It works as a foreshadowing as to the hardships and disappointments that Anzaldúa had to face. As I read the story, I was able to really understand and feel the emotions and feelings of the situations and definitely feel the personal depth of the story.

I found it fascinating how she uses "spanglish" in the text. For example, Anzaldúa writes "the next year the drought continued y el ganado got hoof and mouth" (30). Although I do not understand Spanish at all (though I do try to figure some things out since it is at least somewhat like English and French) I do empathize with this bi-lingual mash-up. I am bilingual and when speaking mandarin I often use english words dispersedly throughout my speech. One can still understand the general meaning of the passages even without any background in Spanish.

What became very apparent to me in this reading was how split down the middle the author felt, between being American and Mexican. She states this feeling in obvious, and not so obvious ways. First of all, the constant switching between English and Spanish is a prime

example. She identifies herself as both an English speaker and a Spanish speaker, so instead of choosing one she uses both. On page 24 she says (sorry for the spacing in between sentences not being identical)

"1,950 mile-long wound
dividing a pueblo, a culture,
running down the length of my body
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja me raja"

She is not only flat out saying the divide she feels, but she is literally illustrating it with the way she places the words on the page. The phrases she uses are literally dividing apart. She also goes on to compare the border between the USA and Mexico it's own country, making a comparison to a wound hemorrhaging before it scabs over. The author in my opinion does an extremely good job at depicting the clash between societies.

One of the things I found most interesting in this section of the reading is when she quotes Ray Gwyn Smith "Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?"

Her assertion that "wild tongues can't be tamed they can only be cut," I think, shows the problem that we see with assimilation. I think she at one point talks about the "silent invasion" that I think is one of the major fears that many xenophobic people in the US hold. It has led to an increase in immigration reinforcement and a cruel treatment of people which they call criminal, illegals, and aliens to make it easier.

I had never really considered all the various types of languages that emerged on the border but I think that the fact that these immigrants are creating their own living language is what makes people believe that there is a silent invasion to take over the US. The previous immigrants such as the Irish and Italians seemed to have had their language torn away from them and I guess that made it easier for them to "assimilate" in the the US. The people that she writes about forbidding the use of Spanish in school still exist and even I have been forbidden from speaking Spanish at school when I was younger.

What brought me closer to this book is when she speaks about the shame that is occurred through language differences.

PART II&III: In-class handout

SPAN 113

Globalization and Literature

Borders and Immigration: Anzaldúa

Part of the power of Anzaldúa's prose comes from her ability to shift registers, tones and even languages in mid-thought. You are going to do a close reading of a passage in order to understand how Anzaldúa uses her writing *style* to emphasize her *argument* about life in the Borderlands.

Step 1

Read through the passage. As you read, look for examples of how the author shifts between different literary genres and languages. This may happen on multiple levels: linguistic (including, but not limited to, English, Castilian, Chicano, Nahuatl...); tonal/generic (including, but not limited to, academic, poetic, psychoanalytic--something you would say to a therapist--, manifesto--a call to political action--, autobiographic, choral refrains...).

With your partner, identify *at least* three examples of tone/genre shifting. After you have identified the shifts, discuss *why* she chooses to make those specific shifts.

Some of you will share your findings with the class.

Step 2

In 5-10 minutes, write a few lines in an Anzaldúa-like style. These can be personal lines (you will not be made to share with the class if you don't feel comfortable); the important thing is to incorporate linguistic and tonal shifts into your writing. If you are multi-lingual, feel free to mix languages; if you have a personal language (or gibberish), use that as well. If you absolutely don't know where to start, try to translate one of Anzaldúa's paragraphs into a language that matches your own personal experiences.

List of passages assigned to student groups (all taken from Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera*, Aunt Lute Books, 1987):

Selling the Farm (30-31); Intimate Terrorism: Life in the Borderlands (42-44); The Presences (57-8); *Nopal de Castilla* (67-8); The *Coatlicue* State (68-9); *Oyé como ladra: el lenguaje de la frontera* (77-8); Linguistic Terrorism (80-1); *Ni cuicani*: I, the Singer (91-3).

PART III: Student work

see attached.